

Clyde Deal Oral History
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CLYDE DEAL
FERRYBOATMEN'S UNION OF CALIFORNIA
INLANDBOATMEN'S UNION OF THE PACIFIC

NARRATOR: CLYDE DEAL

INTERVIEWER: KARYL WINN

SUBJECTS: INTERNATIONAL SEAMEN'S UNION; NATIONAL MARITIME UNION; JOSEPH CURRAN; COMMUNIST PARTY; MARINE COOKS AND STEWARDS UNION; DAVE GRANGE; UNION DEMOCRACY

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[00:00:05] CLYDE: On the outside, we certainly could lick ourselves, and that's true in our country today. No one can lick us on the outside, but believe me, we can destroy ourselves. And it seems to me maybe we're trying to do so.

[00:00:24] KARYL: Were you concerned at that time in the middle thirties about the amount of dissension within the ranks of the maritime labor movement?

[00:00:38] CLYDE: Well, you must understand this: I was concerned only about one thing, and that was building a strong maritime labor movement. Anything that mitigated against that, I was concerned about it. We

were primarily concerned about our real opposition, which was the employers. And we were vitally concerned, of course, then, just as we are today.

[00:01:19] You see, our experience in the twenties, it started in the twenties, through the boring from within, they called it. You see, the extreme left wing, if you want to call it by a polite name, appeared then on the scene, and their first objective was to take over the labor movement. And you know, they're smarter today than they were then. They've learned considerably. But they're still fundamentally the same as they were then. They discovered that they couldn't take over the labor movement. We isolated them. We became aware of who they were and their purpose. Their purpose was to destroy the craft setup.

[00:02:23] Now, what was there? A procedure, very similar as it is today, destroy the confidence of the membership in the officials. Anybody that served more than two years as a crook, he's a phony. Yeah, he's a phony. Phony was the favorite word. I don't know of all the names I've been called on the waterfront. You see, there was a little paper, the Waterfront Worker, and there wasn't an issue in San Francisco unless the Clyde Deal was blasted. If you can get ahold of Waterfront Workers during the thirty-three, thirty-four, thirty-five period, you'll find out what [?they call the paper?]. [laughs]

[00:03:29] KARYL: Was your own newspaper The Searchlight helpful to you in correcting the record?

[00:03:39] CLYDE: I didn't bother with that in our own Searchlight. It served the interests of our organization. Let me say this, I was convinced from the very first, but I always avoided the negative approach of anything. As I said, however, these things I don't know. But the negative approach, it kills, really, it stifles, it stifles.

[00:04:11] So I had—in any really dedicated labor leader—I'm not talking about office boy, but leader—must carry, in a positive manner, the policy convinced is right for the membership and must drag with you that negative membership, part of the membership, which never encourages but always criticizes. You must ignore it and drag it along. And not let it get him down. Some of them just quit. Some of them say, "What do you want, boys?"

[00:05:08] For instance, our ideals were high. I wouldn't have the grievance, so unless I personally viewed it was right, just because it brought it into the office didn't mean that it had happened. They had to convince me that it was correct, it was right, because we had no appeal. You must understand this, and I never lost grievances, and I handled hundreds of them. I'm talking of dealing with the corporation, with the Southern Pacific, Santa Fe, Western, Northwestern Pacific, [?the key routes?]. I didn't lose grievances. Why? Because I very carefully determined first, did they have a grievance, was it justified?

[00:06:03] Now, the companies knew that. I took the position to the membership, and I says, "No, I will not handle this. If you want to handle it, you have to get somebody else. Because," I said, "if I handle this agreement, we'll lose it. I know. Because it's not right. It's not in accordance with the contract agreement. It doesn't have any merit. So we lose it." We handled another. They're the same caliber. We lose it. Man comes along [with] a real grievance. If one of the companies tell me, "Here you come with another phony grievance." I have two strikes for a start on me. I've got to convince them first it didn't fool me, and then get into the merit stuff.

[00:06:57] So, of course, I took advantage, I suppose, without realizing it. The fact that I was the founder of the union, and I could do things that those who succeeded me couldn't get away with. I thought after I started office, I wondered why they didn't take me up and say, "Well, we'll get somebody else." [laughs]

[00:07:18] KARYL: I think you were too successful.

[00:07:24] CLYDE: Well, today—and I speak all not from the second-hand information, but from personal information, personal knowledge, seventeen years in mediation service, and being on both sides of the fence, for a little while on the other side, and then the middle for many years. There's too many in the labor movement today, officers—are you recording this? Okay—that are concerned about being re-elected, primarily. And they think that there's got to be an increase every year, regardless of the merits, regardless of what it may do to the country, every year. And in addition to that, they think if there's a grievance brought to the office, it must be handled regardless of its merits, because [if] they don't, they'll make an enemy. And if they make an enemy, they'll lose a vote. Now, what that's going to do to the union, if it's a phony grievance, doesn't seem to make any difference. I always thought it was important that the union established and maintained integrity in its dealings.

[00:09:17] KARYL: Getting back to the issue of the left wing and the problems that you had with it, the National Maritime Union was criticized during its long history for problems that—

[00:09:35] CLYDE: Well, Joe Curran has done a remarkable job. I'm personal friends with Joe Curran. I personally met Joe at the thirty-five convention of the International Seamen's Union when he came in heading a delegation from the rank and file, as they called it then, and serving notice in effect on the International Seamen's Union, that something had to be done and done quickly, or else. Well, Joe, I seemed to like him from the first. Now, you really want this history?

[00:10:30] KARYL: I'd like it. Yes, if you're involved in it.

[00:10:36] CLYDE: [laughs] You see, on the Atlantic coast, you had the sailors, the firemen, the cooks and stewards in the International Seamen's. And at that time, I'm speaking now at thirty-five, they were merely skeleton organizations.

[00:10:57] The Marine Cooks and Stewards, I think, had probably the only agreements that amounted to anything, and they had one line. And it was composed primarily of Negroes, this Marine Cooks and Stewards at that time, active. And Dave Grange from the Bahamas was the secretary. Gray, big, happy-go-lucky Negro that I liked immensely. [laughs] And Papa Dave, they called him. And the boys realized that they were on the verge of reorganization. And Dave and his friends have made up their mind that here is going to come a bunch of white boys, and they're going to book Papa Dave out of his job, so we'll have to revise the constitution and fix it so they can't vote him out of his job.

[00:12:02] So they revised the constitution. They gave Dave—now I'm talking about thirty-five, still in the Depression era—\$10,000 a year, they voted him. Which to that was just fabulous in those days, you see. And they revised the constitution, so they couldn't even have an election unless a majority of the membership voted to demand an election, which meant no elections. Which meant Papa Dave, if that was observed, served from here on out.

[00:12:44] Now the Cooks and Stewards—this was Dave's organization, Papa Dave—and the sailors and firemen did similarly. They decided they'd sort of fix themselves in, because they saw the storm coming with Joe Curran and the NMU [National Maritime Union] and so on. They were afraid of it and afraid they were going to lose their jobs. These are serious charges, I realize, but they're true. And so they revised their constitution.

[00:13:26] And so Joe enters the scene, as I said, and they begin to organize. Well, this concerned me. I'd been voted in the meantime. The international convention had voted to kick the Sailors' Union of the Pacific out of the international, because of what they'd done to Andrew [Furuset], he was very bitter. And I got up on the

floor and opposed it. Incidentally, I had a cane at that time. I'd been attacked, as I told you briefly at my home of the year before, by somebody who wanted to put me in the hospital, and they almost succeeded. But as I said, that's a different story. And when I got up in the convention to introduce an amendment not to kick the Sailors' Union out, but to confer with them—I'd seen that they wouldn't adjust themselves to the international constitution observance rules, and so on—I had a cane in my hand when I got up, and they said, "Are you talking that way after what happened to you?" I said, "Yes, certainly." I said, "That was personal. This is organizational." But they voted my amendment down, but they did elect me vice president in the same breath.

[00:15:10] And then I had an idea. After the convention adjourned, I thought that I would go in the meantime—it may have been two or three months after the time. I don't know the exact time. But Joe Curran, in the meantime, had made phenomenal progress. And he'd set up an organization and named it, and so on. And they were doing business. And here, this little skeleton group of the international trucked along, blind as a bat, thinking they could weather the storm because they had changed a few words in their constitution.

[00:16:03] So I decided that I'd go and have a talk with Joe, which I did, in New York. And I talked it over with Joe, and I got him to agree that he would abide by the constitution if they'd hold an election. And he'd stay in the international, if they'd hold an election according to the rules of the constitution of the International Seamen, which meant you had to be a member of one year, which would cut out a lot of the Johnny-come-lately's.

[00:16:50] And after I had this talk with him, I says, "Well, I'm going to take this up to the executive board, Joe." And I wrote I'd rather make the report to the executive board, recommend it, that we meet Joe halfway, and we agree to hold an election. I says, "Yes, undoubtedly. If we hold an election now, somebody's going to lose their job." And I put these words in it. I says, "We're either going to survive, or we're going to destroy the International Seamen's Union by trying unsuccessfully to hold jobs for certain individuals. I says, "You have a choice." Well, the executive board was controlled by the secretary, some of these very unions I was talking about. [laughs] I says, "You can't save some people against their own folly. And if you try to, you destroy yourself." I predicted in the convention that that would be the last convention they'd have unless they change the policy.

[00:18:18] Well, instead of them acting favorably or unfavorably and notifying, they didn't notify me. I learned later, they tried first, they considered seriously bringing charges against me. And then when they decided they couldn't get away with bringing charges against me, because I really had the only successful organization in the international at that time, and they couldn't, on the merits of it, get away with it—they decided that they would destroy me by making public to all the international affiliates, that is, they would distribute my letter, which they did. Now, I wasn't aware of any of this until I walked in the hall in San Diego. I was down there visiting, and I walked in the hall of the Sailors' Union, and they had it on the wall. And they congratulated me. [laughs] They were very pleased with it.

[00:19:41] Well, what I predicted happened. Joe Curran, of course, didn't go along with that kind of a setup. He couldn't. And they refused to hold an election, so Joe just kept going. And today, and incidentally, the last—Joe, you know, was not too well-educated. He's learned, I think, an awful lot. I don't know whether he's too wise in his later years or not, but he soon learned that he was surrounded by communists. I'm calling the spade a spade, no question about it.

[00:20:29] KARYL: There was no doubt in your mind at that time?

[00:20:31] CLYDE: He was surrounded by communists on his executive board. Joe was in a bad spot. He was not a communist. And I don't know who taught him, but he learned something. [laughs]

[00:20:47] Anyway, he went along as best he could. If you had met these boys, I knew them. I was in his office more than once in New York. And finally, he got in a position where he could take over and kick them out, which he proceeded to do. For instance, in the last—in the convention of 1940, when John L. Lewis made his last oration that came out against [Franklin D.] Roosevelt—which I didn't forgive him. I don't think anybody else really did, because Roosevelt made him, saved his union. That is, Roosevelt and Congress.

[00:21:56] At that convention, [Harry] Bridges was introducing some resolutions denouncing, using the usual shibboleths and language, imperialism and et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And I forget exactly what it was all about at that time, but it had to do with international policy. And Joe Curran got enleagued into it. And then he came to me after the convention recessed. He went up to his [?different environment], and he says, "Deal, I'm always getting into a jam. How in the world am I going to get out of this?" He said, "Will you tell me how to get out of this? I got tangled up with them, and my membership, the ones that really supported me, don't like it. And I heard them." This was the day before that this had happened. He joined in on a resolution that he shouldn't have joined in on. But they got him into it, some matter alone.

[00:23:22] Well, I said, Joe, "Why don't you introduce a resolution tomorrow?" He said, "Will you write it?" [laughs] And so I wrote Joe's resolution. And then between the two of us, we worked it out. And he introduced it to the next day and got himself kosher again. [laughs] That was my last experience with Joe, in 1940. And I see where—and I said, I don't know who taught him. But he played it very shrewdly, and he did maintained control. And it was rather miraculous that he was able to do it, because he was surrounded.

[00:24:26] KARYL: Did he follow the practice that you had of isolating these people?

[00:24:31] CLYDE: Oh well, you see, it wasn't difficult for us to isolate them. We could recognize them very quickly by the language he used, for one thing. The resolutions they introduced were another thing. You see, they wanted to spend—get into an established union, like the Inland Boatmen's at that time. The first purpose was to discredit the officers. The second purpose was to suspend the union's money and to disperse it among front organizations. That was it, and to take over the union. After they'd succeeded in discrediting the officers, blaming them for squandering their funds, and take over the union, it wasn't difficult.

[00:25:30] KARYL: But the unions were concerned about progressive things at that time, too.

[00:25:35] CLYDE: Yes, now. The question of definition, what is a progressive thing? What is the union concerned about there?

[00:25:43] KARYL: Wages and—

[00:25:44] CLYDE: Hours and working conditions. Period. That was our principal concern. First was to be recognized as a union. You have to be born before you can live. The union had to be born first. Then it had to learn how to live in the world in which it was born.

[00:26:17] You had then a different situation, than something you have now. You see, today, or in those days, we were concerned in a family and as an individual, food, clothing, and shelter was primary concern. Today, that is not the primary concern of the young fellow. He gets it, he doesn't know where it comes from or how it comes, but he gets it, even though he may do nothing in return for it. But then, living as an organization, recognition, and status, what is your first concern?

[00:27:06] KARYL: You didn't want to be diverted by these other concerns. You had set your priorities.

[00:27:12] CLYDE: Ideological concerns, utopia, no. No. That was—you see, these other concerns, I don't know how I can describe them. I wish I had one of those speeches by the recognized representatives of this foreign ideology, that are known as communism. Of those days, you would be surprised. They had certain words, certain language. Imperialism, for one thing. Oh boy, how they did rock that one. And personal denunciation. And they were not imaginative, they were wirehaired, they were dirty. They were uneducated as a rule, but they were very valuable in what they learned by rope, by heart.

[00:28:24] I'm talking about the most of them. They're clever today, they're smarter today. Some of them mean they're smart enough to disguise. They don't give it away by language anymore so easily. Solidarity is a word that has lost all merits, as far as I'm concerned. That's a favorite word, solidarity. You've heard it? [laughs]

[00:28:52] KARYL: Solidarity house, you know.

[00:28:56] CLYDE: [laughs] It's a bad word, as I far as I'm concerned.

[00:29:04] KARYL: [laughs] What about the—there was a pacifist movement within some of the more militant unions in the late thirties? Was this ever a concern?

[00:29:13] CLYDE: Pacifist movement?

[00:29:15] KARYL: Yes.

[00:29:15] CLYDE: Pacifist in regard to what?

[00:29:18] KARYL: Well, for our not getting involved in the war that was developing.

[00:29:23] CLYDE: Yeah, and that movement changed, remember? [laughs]

[00:29:29] KARYL: How did it affect you? How did it affect your union?

[00:29:31] CLYDE: Not at all. I was—I don't know, I was guided in some respects. These resolutions, many of them came in trying to get us divided into other pastures, you know, and get us involved in the political fronts. No, what you had to do, though, is to stay late, and I'll wake them sometimes.

[00:29:57] KARYL: You have meetings?

[00:29:58] CLYDE: Oh, yes, one of their favorite tricks was to keep the meeting going until midnight or one o'clock in the morning. And then after the old standbys had gone home to get some sleep, vote the resolution. See? They're never able to do it so far as I'm concerned, they outstayed them then adjourned the meeting perfectly legally and perfectly properly.

[00:30:29] The [?version of thumbs was their favorite trick?]. To get you to go to a meeting in Chicago—what was it they called it among their big ones? Many invitations I received suggest one time I go to Russia. Didn't fall for it. Something must have guided me or someone—I can't really—because I was able some way or another to avoid the traps. I'm not particularly clever, I just happened to be able to avoid the traps. There was many a trap laid. Oh, yes. They were very active. They didn't—some of them you knew, they didn't hide themselves.

[00:31:33] Now, who they reported to, they don't—I'm talking about the followers of Marx and Engels and so on. And some of them were sincere. The only trouble is that in discussing it and theorizing our philosophy, in trying to engage in a little philosophy. You want that? Number one, what it all about? It's just trying to learn to live together. And the attempt to impose your will on the other fellow. And, of course, the logical end of—this is something that may shock you—but the logical end of democracy, you know, is anarchy. And I'm a Democrat. [laughs] In other words, we've almost reached that point in this country.

[00:32:59] KARYL: You were against the general strike. You couldn't have been an anarchist. [laughs]

[00:33:06] CLYDE: Oh no. But I say that if you're going to say any restriction upon the individual, any restraint upon the individual, it certainly leads eventually anarchy, no organization. And, of course, as you know, anarchy in its final analysis, as I understand it, means that everybody is so good and so perfect that no one would think of hurting the other fellow. Is that your... [laughs] So, I suppose when we are all perfect, as Christ said we should be, maybe we can engage in anarchy, but not in this very practical world. Selfish, greedy. See, we're kicked out of Eden for our greed and our [audio cuts]